

Doubles: Pablo Picasso and Abby Heller-Burnham



Sometimes, I think I have a greater understanding than I did in my twenties of why Jacques Derrida was led to talk “around” painting. The deconstructive approach to symbolic representation cuts and cuts until only shards are left; and these two symbolic representations, by Pablo Picasso and Abby Heller-Burnham, are so rich in possible interpretive “additions,” especially in the chiasmus between them, that it is painful for one who wants to propel two sequential centuries forward simultaneously to think of the cutting process; or, as old blues songs would have it, to walk the killing floor. One reason to talk “around” the two paintings together is because the chiasmus enriches two representational symbols already thematically and formally loaded with ore; another (which I will partially cop to) is pure intellectual laziness, in a state of dazzled befuddlement.

Picasso’s “La Vie,” from his blue period in 1903, has, in the robed female on the right holding the child seemingly stripped from his parents, a figure who may be taken as pure allegory among a host of doubled symbols; the meta-painted couple clinging together in their nudity for the foregrounded couple also doing the same; and the meta-painted kneeling man, lost in thought or slumber, doubling the child in the arms of the robed woman. If the crux of the painting seems to be the robed woman in blue, and the painting is called “La Vie” (“Life”), the robed woman in blue is a figure allegorically representing human life in some essential way; the human animal reproduces, and the child grows away from his parents, and the cycle repeats infinitely, or until the curtain closes on humanity as a species. The rhythm of the composition flows into the standing man’s pointed finger, and into the robed woman,

suggesting his psychological awareness of how the life cycle works, and the woman's gaze follows his gesture. The acquisition of wisdom from grief; that is one major subtext of a painting that carries many levels of richness.

The grief acquired in Abby Heller-Burnham's painting is also grief in a process of multiplication; but it is grief is a multiplication of selves, rather than in the process of reproduction. The painting's narrative splits down the middle once the ambiguity is made visible that the twins may be in fact an ocular illusion, or one person seen twice. Because it is set in an art gallery, Heller-Burnham's painting has just as much of a hinge towards being "meta" as Picasso's does; but "meta" here is a restaging of what is already happening when we view the painting. The maze Heller-Burnham creates has more convolutions and doubles in it than Picasso's does; and because we are viewing a "twinned" figure, or twins, viewing a series of three paintings in which woman are shown in the midst of contradictory activities, the basic allegory seems to be that the painter/narrator is representing a sense of confusion about the "staging of the feminine"; specifically, the staging of the feminine within the aesthetic. But with light pouring in at either end, and with the addition of two seemingly random figures in both openings, the symbol has a hinge to nullity and absurdity even in the context of the painting, which has the contradictory effect of staging not merely the feminine but self-transcendence within the feminine.